

The promise of our Nation lies in its promise to every one of its citizens that they will be judged by the quality of their work, the depth of their potential and the strength of their intellect and character. Anything less undermines the very principles of fairness we uphold and it diminishes not just those who are discriminated against, but the professional communities in which they live and work the Senate included.

Recently, several Senate employees announced that they have formed an informal, non-partisan group called Gays, Lesbians and Allies Senate Staff, GLASS, Caucus. The caucus is open to all Senate staff and is the first ever for gay and lesbian Senate staff and their allies. It is designed to raise awareness of issues affecting the gay and lesbian community and increase visibility; and promote the welfare and dignity of gay and lesbian Senate employees by providing a safe environment for social interaction and professional development.

The GLASS caucus held its inaugural reception last night. I was honored to attend and congratulate the members on their organization's formation. This was an historic moment for the Senate and special recognition must be given to four of the founding members of the caucus for a job well done: Mat Young, Lynden Armstrong, John Fossum and Jeffrey Levensaler.

Gay and lesbian Americans want the same civil rights that are extended to other Americans—nothing more, nothing less. We must build a community here in the Senate and across the Nation of mutual respect, tolerance, and freedom. This new staff caucus will make many valuable contributions in that regard.

I wish this group well and hope that it will prove to be a valuable addition to the Senate community.

ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS

SMALL BUSINESS PERSONS OF THE YEAR 2004

• Ms. MURKOWSKI. Mr. President, I rise today to commemorate the importance of small business as the foundation of the U.S. economy and to congratulate Michael and Michele Robuck, co-owners of the Alaska Mint based in Anchorage, AK, who today have been named the Small Business Persons of the Year for 2004 by the U.S. Small Business Administration, SBA.

According to the Small Business Development Center of Alaska, 97 percent of all businesses in Alaska are defined as small businesses. Eighty-five percent of all new jobs in Alaska are created by businesses with fewer than 20 employees. Small businesses have created the majority of the new jobs created in the last few years on a nationwide basis. So the importance of small businesses to the Nation's and to the Alaskan economies is obvious.

The President's small business agenda recognizes that the role of government is not to create wealth but to create an environment where entrepreneurial endeavors can flourish and people can directly benefit from their efforts. It is well accepted that small businesses and young business are the driving force in job creation and prosperity.

Since 1963, the President has designated a week as the National Small Business Week in recognition of the small business's contributions to the country. Next month, the White House and the Small Business Administration will join in celebrating the small business people and businesses of the year.

Today, Mike and Michelle Robuck, as co-owners of the Alaska Mint, will be named as the Alaska District Small Business of the Year 2004. They were nominated by their banker, First National Bank Alaska for this award. Congratulations to Mike and Michele Robuck.

Small business winners are evaluated in Alaska by a panel of judges convened by the Alaska District Office on a variety of criteria including: staying power, growth in employees, increase in market or sales volume, response to adversity, contributions to the community, and innovation of the products they offer.

Now let me tell you about Mike and Michele Robuck, the Alaska Mint and why they deserved to be small business persons of the year for Alaska. Alaska Mint is a second generation Alaskan business that trades in many things but most important in the commodities that made Alaska—gold, silver, and platinum. Alaska Mint designs and produces medallions, coins and jewelry. The Alaska Mint is designated as the official mint of the State of Alaska, the Alaska Railroad, the White Pass and Yukon Route, the Iditarod Trail Committee, the Yukon Quest, and the Anchorage Fur Rendezvous.

Part of the wonderful story of the Alaska Mint is its very beginning. Mike Robuck started the business as a sidewalk vending cart in downtown Anchorage in 1989. He was following in his father's foot steps that had started a small family-owned jewelry store in Anchorage in 1967. Mike learned the importance of dealing with the public and the value of tourism to Alaska. It was not long after that Mike opened a store and assemble the equipment to manufacture his coins, jewelry, and collectibles. I wish I could share with each member of the Senate an example of his creativity and artistry.

With the help of the Small Business Administration and the First National Bank Alaska, Mike and Michele Robuck expanded the business and began doing business nationwide with the help of QVC network and the internet. Last year Alaska Mint released a coin to commemorate the tragic events of September 11, 2001, that within a 24-hour period sold and raised over \$50,000 for the Red Cross.

Their success is more than just the bottom line. The Robucks often assist a variety of charities and local schools. Mike and Michele help with counseling and provide jobs for two rehabilitation programs helping people to regain their place in the community.

It took 5 years since the Robucks formally formed the Alaska Mint for the business to become truly established and successful. From a one-person operation in the mid 1980s, the business now employs 10 people full time and increases to 20 during the summer tourist season. They are now a tourist destination and a place of education about the art of their work.

When the criteria for the award of the Small Business Persons of the Year are applied to the Robucks, they meet all of the standards. They shine like the coins they make. They have shown their staying power, increased the number of employees, increased their markets and sales volume, responded to challenges, shown innovation of the products they offer, and continue to contribute to the community. Mike and Michele Robuck, as a team, exemplify the qualities, the business skills, personal character, and the spirit of Alaska that warrant their being awarded the Small Business Persons of the Year Award for 2004.●

IN RECOGNITION OF SMOKEY BEAR'S 60TH BIRTHDAY

• Mr. DOMENICI. Mr. President, I rise today to celebrate a birthday and to pay tribute to a hero and icon from my home State a New Mexican who became the renowned symbol for the Co-operative Forest Fire Prevention program. His name is Smokey Bear.

Sixty years ago this year, Smokey Bear became the voice for the Forest Service public education campaign to save American forests. Since his creation in 1944, most Americans now quickly associate the name Smokey Bear with his mantra: "Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires."

Not many know the remarkable story of Smokey Bear or that the fire prevention program is the longest running public service advertising campaign in the history of the Ad Council. In 1950, Smokey Bear became real, sadly through an unfortunate forest fire. That spring, in Lincoln County, a little black bear cub was found clinging to the side of a charred pine tree after a forest fire swept through the mountains. After being discovered, he was briefly called "Hot Foot Teddy," but was later named Smokey Bear after the Ad Council's poster bear.

Since that late spring day, that cub became the living symbol of Smokey Bear and worked to remind Americans of the importance of outdoor fire safety. It is a message whose importance has not faded since the bear was discovered on a charred New Mexico mountain.

New Mexico, along with other Western States, has experienced devastating